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## Almost Pioneers: One Couple's Homesteading Adventure in the West

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credible! Now what? How long were they going to be stuck in this ice box? Olaus pulled out his pipe with hands numb from the cold and managed to light it." Throughout the work, Sollien, based on regimental histories or letter collections, imagines how Hansen would have likely reacted and creates imaginary discussions and scenarios. Such imaginings might serve well in a work of historical fiction. In fact, reading this book as if it were historical fiction might be the best way to glean insight from the author's research. However, as a work of historical nonfiction, such use of imagination without citations or evidence creates serious problems. In addition, the work would have benefited from an examination of immigration historiography to contextualize Hansen's immigrant experience. Most notably, the bibliography does not cite works from the late Jon Gjerde, the most important historian of Norwegian immigration to the United States (*From Peasants to Farmers: The Migration from Belestrand, Norway, to the Upper Middle West* and *The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Revolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830–1917*). Sollien's work addresses an important and overlooked topic. One may hope that it provides the impetus for more in-depth studies of Norwegian Americans, their place in Iowa history, and their role in the U.S. military during the Civil War and afterwards.

*Almost Pioneers: One Couple's Homesteading Adventure in the West*, by Laura Gibson Smith, edited by John J. Fry. Guilford, CT: TwoDot, imprint of Globe Pequot Press, 2013. xv, 215 pp. Maps, photographs, notes, appendix, index. \$16.95 paperback.

Reviewer Dee Garceau is professor of history at Rhodes College. She is the author of *The Important Things of Life: Women, Work, and Family in Sweetwater County, Wyoming, 1880–1929* (1997).

Western writer William Kittredge once said, "We tell stories so we can inhabit them." *Almost Pioneers* speaks to our need to make meaning out of choices we have left behind. Laura Gibson Smith homesteaded barely three years in Chugwater, Wyoming, yet she flagged this experience as significant and wrote about it, even after returning to Iowa for most of her adult life. "There is a fascination about the vastness of the western plains," she wrote, "the uncertainty of the horizon, the crispness and clarity of the air . . . that captures the imagination of anyone who comes to Wyoming"(1). Not only was Smith moved by the high plains landscape, but the subsistence life of homesteading framed the first years of her marriage, adding romance to the daily business of working out domestic routines. Her memoir reads like trimmings in a scrapbook that make an ordinary life exceptional.

Laura Smith and her husband, Earle, married in 1911, moved to Wyoming in 1913, and earned title to their claim in 1916. Their brief stint on the homestead offers insight into the range of motives for claiming public land. The Smiths caught the fever when others in their hometown spoke of "prospering with wheat and cattle" in Chugwater, Wyoming (3). But the Smiths treated their claim as an investment, not as a ranch or farm. After earning title, they left Wyoming and rented the land to tenant ranchers. Their western claim became a modest, long-term source of income, and the Smiths became absentee landlords. They spent most of their adult lives in Iowa, Earle serving as county attorney and Laura raising their son.

Those neighbors who stayed on the land in Wyoming mobilized family labor in a group enterprise, committed to ranching full time. In contrast, Earle Smith periodically returned to Iowa to teach school while Laura held down their residency. In this respect, the Smiths were like single women homesteaders who supported their investment claims with wage work outside the claim.

But if the Smiths were temporary visitors on the land, Laura Gibson Smith still drew on the lore of pioneering to add meaning to their experience. Her stories of surviving rattlesnakes, high winds, and heavy snows became bonds that knit together a new marriage. Her descriptions of baking bread on a coal stove, carrying water, and learning to plan for long winters without access to grocery stores added color to domestic routine. Smith reveled in "roughing it" even as she described its inconveniences. The romance of pioneering was a luxury that temporary residents could afford; she was aware that neighboring ranch women tired of privation and that their childrearing and ranching responsibilities bound them to their claims in ways that she and Earle escaped. Her narrative reveals what differences youth, temporary residency, and middle-class income could make in the lives of homesteaders on the high plains.

Editor John L. Fry has done a fine job annotating the memoir. His notes verify facts, add back story, and provide useful explanations of land law. In an afterword, Fry emphasizes the Smiths' status as sojourners who exploited an economic opportunity, but adds that even the opportunity for absentee landlords was short-lived, since drought and falling farm prices prompted committed ranchers to leave their homesteads and rented acreage by the score. What is most striking is that Laura Gibson Smith shared with lifelong ranch women a love of the Wyoming plains that deepened the color and texture of domestic life in significant ways.